

## CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

Sub 1  
5 1. A method of providing a customer with information regarding a product, the method comprising:

receiving an electronic request for information for a product;

searching a database to determine if the database contains information for the product;

if the database contains information for the product, sending an electronic message to the customer containing selected information from the database that

10 corresponds to the product; and

if the database does not contain information for the product, requesting a sourcing agent to perform an off-line search to gather information for the product which gathered information is returned to the customer in an electronic message and added to the database.

15 2. The method as recited in claim 1, wherein requesting a sourcing agent to perform a search comprises forwarding the electronic request to the sourcing agent as a request for quotation.

20 3. The method as recited in claim 2, wherein the request for quotation is prepared by the customer in response to a prompt that is sent to the customer when the database does not contain information for the product.

4. The method as recited in claim 1, wherein the electronic request is received via the Internet.

5. The method as recited in claim 2, wherein the electronic request is forwarded to the sourcing agent via an email.

6. A method for sourcing a product, the method comprising:  
receiving an electronic request for quotation specifying a product;  
5 comparing the electronic request for quotation against a set of predetermined rules to determine a sourcing agent to which the electronic request for quotation is to be routed; and

automatically routing the electronic request for quotation to the sourcing agent determined to be appropriate by the step of comparing, the sourcing agent performing a  
10 search to find a source for the product specified in the request for quotation.

7. The method as recited in claim 6, wherein the step of comparing comprises comparing words in the electronic request for quotation against a set of predetermined product descriptors to determine a type of product specified in the request for quotation.

8. The method as recited in claim 6, further comprising the step of preparing an  
15 email that includes information representative of the electronic request for quotation and routing the email to the sourcing agent determined to be appropriate by the step of comparing.

9. A computer-readable medium having instruction for sourcing a product, the instructions performing steps comprising:

20 receiving an electronic request for quotation specifying a product;  
comparing the electronic request for quotation against a set of predetermined rules to determine a sourcing agent to which the electronic request for quotation is to be routed; and

routing the electronic request for quotation to the sourcing agent determined to be appropriate by the step of comparing where the sourcing agent performs a search to find a source for the product specified in the request for quotation.

10. The computer-readable medium as recited in claim 9, wherein the instructions  
5 perform the further step of sending the source for the product specified in the request for quotation as determined by the sourcing agent to the originator of the request for quotation.

11. A method of providing a customer with information regarding a product, the method comprising:

10 receiving an electronic request for information for a product;

searching a database to determine if the database contains information for the product;

if the database contains information for the product, sending an electronic message to the customer containing selected information from the database  
15 corresponding to the product; and

if the database does not contain information for the product, performing a search to gather information for the product, sending the gathered information in an electronic message to the customer, and adding the gathered information to the database.

12. A method of providing a customer with information regarding a product, the  
20 method comprising:

receiving an electronic request for information for a product;

searching a database to determine if the database contains information for the product;

if the database contains information for the product, sending an electronic message to the customer containing selected information from the database corresponding to the specified product; and

5 if the database does not contain information for the product, providing the customer with an option to authorize a further search to gather information for the product which, if authorized, causes the performing of the further search, the returning to the customer in an electronic message the gathered information, and the adding of the gathered information to the database.

13. An electronic commerce system, comprising:  
10 an electronic catalog having product information;  
a first component that accepts an electronic request for quotation for a product not contained within the electronic catalog, the first component routing the request for quotation to a sourcing agent determined by the first component to be appropriate for finding a source for the product not contained within the electronic catalog; and  
15 a second component that allows a user to search the electronic catalog to gather information for a selected product and that provides access to the first component if the electronic catalog does not contain information pertaining to the selected product.

14. The system as recited in claim 13, wherein the electronic catalog and second component reside on a Web server of a third party vendor.

20 15. The system as recited in claim 13, further comprising a portal through which the electronic catalog, first component and second component are accessible.

16. The system as recited in claim 13, wherein the electronic catalog, first component and second component reside on a single Web server.